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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the implications for education and social action broadcasting of proposals for the expansion of cable television contained in two British Government reports: "A Report of the Inquiry into Cable Expansion and Broadcasting Policy" (the Hunt Report) and a white paper, "The Development of Cable Systems and Services." Historical perspectives on cable television are offered and it is noted that neither cable technology nor the competition between "wired" and "wireless" broadcasting methods is new. Economic, political, social, technical, and financial issues in the development of cable television are examined. Examples of prior approaches to educational broadcasting are discussed, as well as the framework for cable legislation included in the government reports. The potential and actual implications of cable for education and social action broadcasting are analyzed, and suggestions for action are offered. It is concluded that, for cable television to have any educational impact, the broader context of the audience and audience needs must be considered. Twelve references are cited in notes. (LMM)

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NEW TECHNOLOGIES — NEW OPPORTUNITIES?

THE POTENTIAL OF CABLE IN EDUCATION AND SOCIAL ACTION BROADCASTING

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In March 1982, the Government's Cabinet Information Technology Advisory Panel (ITAP) published its report, which called for rapid decisions to enable the cabling of the UK. In the same month, the Government set up the Hunt Committee to examine the implications of those proposals, especially regarding their effect on broadcasting. The *Hunt Report* was published in October of the same year, and three months later the Media Project organised, on behalf of a group of interested individuals, a seminar on the theme of: "The Implications of Cable and Satellites for Social Action and Educational Broadcasting". One of the speakers at that event was Robin McCron, the author of this paper (a report of the seminar is available from the Media Project).

Robin McCron was subsequently invited to deliver a paper at the annual conference of the Educational Television Association in April 1983, in which he considered the potential of cable for social action and educational broadcasting. The Government's *White Paper* on cable was published a few days later. Robin therefore kindly agreed to revise his original script to take account of the *White Paper's* proposals, as well as the result of the General Election, in order that we might publish the present, up-dated version of his conference paper.

Our thanks go to Robin McCron for allowing us to publish the paper, and for his work on up-dating the original text and adapting it from a speech to be heard to a paper to be read, and to the Educational Television Association for inviting him to speak and thereby making this paper possible.

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INTRODUCTION

Despite the comments about the expansion of cable broadcasting contained in the *Hunt Report*⁽¹⁾ and the more recent *White Paper*⁽²⁾, the implications of this expansion for education and social action broadcasting remain as yet unclear. Indeed, the discussion about the educational and social action applications of cable in both these documents is, at best, vague. Both are content to leave such considerations to any regulatory body that might be set up to oversee the expansion.

Nevertheless, now that a Conservative Government has been returned, probably for a full five-year term, developments in cable are likely to proceed at a rapid pace. For this reason - and because cable will undoubtedly have implications for education and social action broadcasting in the future - now seems a timely moment to make some forecasts about those developments.

This paper takes as its starting point the text of the *White Paper*, together with the plethora of other information that is now becoming available. It discusses the *potential* of cable, and what are likely to be its *actual* implications, for education and social action broadcasting - arguing that, in these areas at least, there may be considerable disparity between the potential and the actual.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES ON CABLE

Cable is often erroneously assumed to be a new technology. It is, in fact, as old as broadcasting itself. There has always been some competition between "wired" and "wireless" methods of disseminating broadcast materials. In the early 1920s, when radio broadcasting began, it was technically almost as feasible to adopt wired or cable transmission of communications, but there were economic and political, as well as technical, reasons why this did not occur. These reasons combined to ensure that wireless broadcasting became, as Tony Smith has described it, "the supreme cultural instrument of the nation state"⁽³⁾; wireless broadcasting was seen as a way of welding together the nation state in an industrial age. So, in spite of its considerable technical potential - including the ability to relay many different channels with minimum interference, even in areas where wireless reception is poor - cable was either confined to individual-to-individual communication (such as the telephone and telegraph) or became a "slave medium" for radio (a delivery system in places where it was technically necessary and/or economically viable).

Indeed, in many areas - especially densely-populated urban ones - it was economically feasible to install cable systems. The cost of cabling could be set against the revenue from subscriberships. There was also a cost advantage for users: in the early 1920's, a wireless set could be bought on hire purchase for a down payment of £2.50 plus weekly instalments of about 15 pence; to go on the cable, one bought the necessary equipment - a simple loudspeaker - for only £1.50, and then paid the cable company about 10 pence a week to receive the service. So, for the short term at least, cable proved attractive to lower income groups, such as poor people in inner-city areas (which is, in fact, where much of the early cabling took place). But this was achieved by compromising the full potential of cable, primitive though that potential now seems. The multiple-channel capacity of cable was not really exploited; in any case, the higher cost of the more complex receiver required to utilise these extra facilities would have been a disadvantage.

So, although cable might then have provided what could be termed the "radio of abundance", this did not happen - partly because of economics, and partly

because of the prevailing political context. Not least was the fear of the fledgling BBC that its programmes might not be relayed by the cable, or at least that people might also be able to listen to imported services such as Radio Normandie and Radio Luxembourg, picked up on powerful receivers by the cable operators and relayed down the cable. The Post Office was also worried, in case the development of cable services broke their existing monopoly on the wired transmission of telephony and telegraph. The end result of these pressures was that radio came to be disseminated mainly by broadcast, and cable was relegated to subordinate status.

With the advent of television in the 1950's, these cable systems were converted relatively easily, again with a cost advantage to the consumer: simple television sets could be hired quite cheaply. The cable technology was still rather primitive by today's standards. In fact, the cables originally installed for radio were often used; these usually had a maximum of six (and sometimes twelve) channels, which was quite sufficient for relay purposes. Although the cable operators found that, with television, their profit margin was smaller, and the market was more competitive, they at least had a foothold in the rapidly-expanding television receiver market. Over time, the consumer enjoyed the additional benefit of not being obliged to buy a succession of new aeroplanes as when BBC, then ITV and finally UHF came along.

But with the arrival of UHF television broadcasting in the 1960's, the picture became rather less rosy for cable companies. Although there was some profit for cable users in changing to the new sets - especially when colour television was introduced - generally speaking the improvement in reception that UHF brought about meant that there was now less need for people to go on the cable, or to remain on it. The number of subscribers to cable began to fall, causing a crisis for the cable companies. Their "captive market" was disappearing, and they had to try to remain competitive. First, they attempted to increase the subscriber density in cabled areas (that is, the proportion of households actually hooked up to a cable that passes by the front door) but this proved difficult. They therefore fell back on the proposal to provide extra, alternative services on the cable; these could not only be an initial inducement to attract new customers, but also an additional source of revenue. It is ironic that, whereas in the 1920's the cable companies deliberately compromised the potential of the medium for their own economic gain, in the 1960's they were obliged to look to that very potential to safeguard their profitability and their return on investment.

The only snag was that the cable operators were prohibited from offering alternative services. So in the early 1970's, the industry, through its trade organisation, the Cable Television Association, lobbied government for a change in the regulations that would allow an extension of cable facilities and services. They argued that cable should be allowed to participate in the open market of goods and services, and that, given adequate financing (which could be guaranteed by advertising, subscriptions and sponsorship of programmes), it could provide, on existing systems, a wide variety of services for the consumer. These might include, for example, new and recent feature films, live sporting events, shopwindow advertising and what were called "second-chance" channels, on which one could see repeats of recent (and perhaps not-so-recent) programmes from other channels. Obviously, the systems would also relay the over-the-air television channels. In addition, however, it was argued that cable could provide community and education channels. The cable industry was in a good position to introduce this wide variety of services because of its links with other sectors of media, and with the leisure industries generally. The nature of these links is a vast subject that cannot be analysed here, though it has been the subject of considerable investigation elsewhere from a political and economic point of view⁽⁴⁾. That analysis makes

it is quite clear that the interest of the industry in expanding of cable services was not the result of an altruistic concern for community development or education broadcasting. The offer of community facilities on cable systems was, in fact, a sop - a "loss-leader" in the quest for the potentially profitable services that could be the salvation of the cable companies.

The Cable Television Association's (CTA) lobbying was at least partly successful, and resulted in permission to establish experimental community cable channels in Greenwich, Bristol, Swindon, Sheffield and Wellingborough. Initially, these channels were forbidden to charge for their service, or to finance it by advertising - but it is widely believed there was an understanding that, in the fullness of time, the then (Tory) Government would allow the introduction of chargeable services on the cable systems.

Another important aspect of the CTA proposals concerns the supposed ultimate objective of cabling: the "wired nation" - that is, a fully-integrated communications network. Although the CTA agreed with this as a long-term objective, they argued that, at that time, there was insufficient financial backing for such a grand scheme; instead, they felt, a start should be made on extending existing cable networks in the short term, and on introducing new services on these systems. With the profits generated from such services, the "wired nation" - the integrated cable and information transfer network - might be developed in an "evolutionary" way. It was suggested that this more cautious strategy might avoid the risks attendant upon launching an entire new system that might later be found to be unworkable or inadequate.

The Cable Television Association did not bargain on a Tory defeat in the 1974 election, nor on the establishment of the Annan Committee - which effectively imposed a moratorium on new developments in broadcasting. One by one the various cable experiments folded - leaving behind, no doubt, valuable technical lessons, but precious few indications of the potential social value of cable systems.⁽⁵⁾

Even at the height of the activity in the 1970's, there was considerable criticism of the CTA proposals, on technical, political and social grounds. From the technical point of view, the main criticism was that, if one was really serious about cable, then the suggested piecemeal, or "evolutionary", approach was unlikely in the end to produce an overall integrated system. A national information transmission network should be developed from the start, and it should be in public ownership. This proposal was put forward by the Post Office Engineering Union⁽⁶⁾ (and, indeed, they are putting it forward again in 1983). It was argued that, in the context of this enterprise, cable television should simply be seen as a marginal "spin-off" - not as the entire object of the exercise.

From the political point of view, there were criticisms of the methods of regulation suggested in the CTA proposals. Should there be a free-for-all - with control of the cable systems in the hands of whoever put up the money - or should there be some kind of public regulation? It was argued that there was a need to avoid a monopoly situation - as, for example, might arise when those who own the cable system itself also own the products that are advertised over that system.

From the social point of view, various questions were asked: Would the development of cable services on the model proposed by the CTA genuinely broaden programming choice for the public, or would they simply be given more of the same old material? Would the implementation of these cable systems actually provide opportunities for a wider range of people to participate in broadcasting?

Would it allow more voices to be heard? Would this access to broadcasting be regarded as a right, or as a privilege bestowed by the people who own the cable? And on what terms would access be granted? At that time there was also disquiet about the possible implications for public service broadcasting; would the successful implementation of pay-television services actually place over-the-air broadcasting in jeopardy because of the competition that might ensue? And furthermore, might not the piecemeal development of cable effectively disenfranchise certain groups of the population - such as the isolated and the poor - who either cannot afford to purchase the services, or who live in areas of the country where there are no services? Once again, it is ironic that these were the very people who ensured the profitability of cable in its early days.

But underlying all these criticisms - technical, political and social - was the major question of finance. How much would all this cost? Who was to pay for it? And how were these finances to be regulated? There is still great confusion about the economics of cable, both for the operators and the consumers. Certainly the 1970's experiments seem to have failed at least partly because there was no clear economic rationale for their existence in the first place. Once the experimental stations had to proceed independently of the funding provided by parent bodies (the parent bodies having pulled out when they realised there was nothing in it for them), they all foundered.

Since then, however, there have been some major refinements in cable technology. In particular, there has been much talk about fibre optics: an extremely flexible technology that has considerable capability for two-way interactive transmission. It will be ready for large-scale implementation very soon. There has also been a massive resurgence of public interest in cable, demonstrated first by the Information Technology Advisory Panel report on cable⁽⁷⁾, then by the *Hunt Committee Report*, and most recently by the *White Paper* on cable. The arguments for the expansion of cable contained in these reports are virtually a re-statement of the CTA proposals of the 1970's. The only major difference is that, this time, the debate - particularly as stated by Kenneth Baker, Minister for Industry and Information Technology, and by the Prime Minister, is set firmly in the context of information technology. This technology is cast in the role of economic saviour of Britain; it will, it is presumed, create more jobs and provide a foothold in the new technologies, thereby generally reviving industry and improving Britain's performance as an exporting nation.

CABLE, EDUCATION AND SOCIAL ACTION BROADCASTING: THE POTENTIAL

John Robinson's recent review of adult education during the last 60 years clearly shows that this country has much to be proud of where education and social action broadcasting are concerned.⁽⁸⁾ From the beginning, the ambition of Lord Reith and his fellow pioneers that the BBC should become "the supreme cultural instrument of the nation state" (patronising though this description is) ensured that broadcasting in this country would be a public service (in many respects, a notion that survives even in the later commercial variants of broadcasting). And their ambition also ensured that education would be regarded as an essential component of this public service. The implementation of a nationwide public service network has meant that a large proportion of the population - or particular sections of it - have been reached in a way that is freely, or virtually freely, available to all who want to avail themselves of it.

Over the years, a combination of various approaches has been used in educational broadcasting. On the one hand, there has been relatively formal instruction - which has given students access not only to the best teachers in the country, but also to useful visual demonstrations of complex materials. Most educators

would now agree that the broadcast media have a valuable role to play in education. Even within the context of formal education, broadcasting has been used both in institutional settings and in people's own homes. The independent companies and the BBC have both developed educational broadcasting to a very high degree; perhaps the pinnacle of their achievements is the Open University, of which this country can rightly be proud.

Alongside this more or less formal mode of educational broadcasting, television is increasingly pioneering what Raymond Williams⁽⁹⁾ has called "education by seeing". It provides a window on the world, so that a geography lesson simply shows the viewer what it is like to live in a remote country, and a history lesson is a leisurely trip round some famous sites. This might be called "experiential" education - or even "unintended" education - but it does utilise the special strengths of television. It is an approach that has particularly characterised Channel 4's policy with respect to education. During the past few years, there have been similar developments in social action broadcasting, to the extent that the boundaries between education and social action broadcasting are now blurred - as indeed are the boundaries between these and other genres of programming on television.

A further development, particularly apparent in social action broadcasting (and resisted in some quarters), is the notion of a *partnership* between broadcasters and non-broadcasters to extract the best out of the medium for the benefit of the public.

There is obviously much debate about the extent to which education broadcasting can stand on its own. For example, can one teach people in their own homes using television programmes, or should such programmes be seen as an adjunct to other, more formal education strategies? What is the relative weight to be accorded to the programme itself and to its associated follow-up activities? There are also psychological arguments - such as how to get over the "one-pacedness" of television, which does not really allow people to learn at a speed which suits them. Or how to tackle the problem that learners are usually merely reacting to programmes - how can they be encouraged to be more active? All these are healthy arguments, and continually help to refine the value of television for education and social action broadcasting.

To sum up, then, the broadcast media have considerable potential for education and social action broadcasting, despite the kinds of problems mentioned above. In principle, cable has exactly the same kind of potential, since it is no more than a different kind of delivery system for the same kind of messages. But the exciting thing about cable is that it can do much more - in theory, that is. A few examples will illustrate the point, though the possibilities are almost endless.

First of all, the expansion of cable will mean that the number of transmission channels available will increase. Hence, more channels could be made available for education and social action broadcasting, and there could be more time for the kind of specialised programmes that tend not to be seen on broadcast television. Programmes could also be targeted more precisely at specific audience groups than is presently possible. There could be access to better time-slots than the "ghetto" periods that still seem to be the rule in education broadcasting. More voices could do the teaching, more people could do the learning, and there would be better opportunities for broadcasters and educationalists to develop partnerships. Thus, the implications of simply an increase in channels are in themselves immense.

Secondly, the advent of two-way switching - interactive cable - obviously offers much greater potential for interactive programming. There would be far more

opportunities for people to learn along with broadcasting, rather than being broadcast at. This is particularly true in view of the availability of sophisticated computerised data bases. For social action broadcasting, for example, an electronic rather than a postal back-up might be provided. There have already been experiments in "telesoftware", the transmission of home computer programmes using broadcast channels.

The expansion of cable will also allow more sound broadcasting channels as well as more video ones. The potential of radio as an educational medium is often neglected; for example, the use of multiple sound channels together with television would permit several simultaneous translations of the same foreign-language film.

A further potential benefit is that cable systems will be localised; the *White Paper* suggests that each should serve no more than half a million people. But these local systems, if based on sophisticated technology, could nevertheless be linked into national networks, and beyond them, even further disseminated through satellite to international networks. So the range of educational initiatives available runs from the very localised to the international; accordingly, material could be tailored to local, national or international needs.

A particular advantage of local systems is that they can facilitate educational initiatives that are relevant to the needs of the particular neighbourhood. Thus they can, in principle, permit the utilisation of the skills of local educators and of the local facilities for education broadcasting. These systems might be either independent, free-standing and home-based, or they might be integrated with the work of the institutions themselves.

The above are merely a few examples of the potential of cable. The crucial question is *whether* and *when* this potential is likely to be realised, and under what constraints. The task for educationalists and education broadcasters is to devise an approach to cable that offers the best chance of capitalising on its potential, while at the same time minimising the risks and costs of becoming involved.

The potential of cable in education will probably best be realised in the context of a system similar to the public service system that serves education tolerably well at the moment: that is, a service that is available to all and is either free or relatively cheap for everyone - so that everyone has a more or less equal opportunity to share in the benefits of cable, and so that no one who wishes to use the service is prevented from doing so on the grounds of cost or geographical location.

THE FRAMEWORK FOR LEGISLATION

Given what we know about the proposed legislation, what are the chances of all this happening? In general, the present writer's response is similar to that of Dipak Nandy, a member of the Annan Committee, who saw the *Hunt Report* as simply "rubber-stamping" the Government's determination to introduce cable television on a laissez-faire commercial basis. Nandy felt that, as far as the Report's investigation into whether cable technology might offer benefits that could be reconciled with the public service broadcasting was concerned, "the execution took place before the trial". (10)

The basic argument of the Hunt proposals is that "Investment in cable television for entertainment purposes will be the necessary base to which the interactive services of economic benefit to business and the individual will be added" (11); an argument also enshrined in the *White Paper*. In other words, although the

ultimate objective is the integrated national information transmission network, the only way to achieve this, according to Hunt, is to develop the broadband information network from the springboard of entertainment services provided on existing cable systems. The profits from these services will fund the implementation of a national communication network. This proposal is in stark contrast to that of the Post Office Engineering Union mentioned earlier - that it would be preferable to start with the integrated information transmission system, and then to decide to what uses it should be put, perhaps including cable television services.

Which of the proposals in the *Hunt Report* and the *White Paper* are most relevant to a discussion of education and social action broadcasting services? There are, in fact, very few specific references to such services - which are seen as a matter for discussion during the franchise application process. But there are some more general guidelines that will have an influence on education services. First, it is proposed that cable services be expanded with the minimum of constraint or regulation, in order to avoid suffocating initiatives. Second, these services should not be viewed in terms of a public service broadcasting model; they are intended to be complementary. Hunt has no fears that cable services will damage public service broadcasting: the Report argues that, with the help of a few minor regulations such as the "must carry" rule (which stipulates that cable systems must carry all BBC and IBA services), it will flourish in this new field. But the watchword of the expansion is "market forces" - the programming available will be that for which people are willing to pay. Other advocates of cable have gone so far as to say that, owing to the multiplicity of channels which will be available, the public service model will become outdated. In future, we will effectively receive a public service simply because there is so much choice; the only reason for safeguarding public service broadcasting in the past was because of the shortage of channels.

The new systems will be financed by a mixture of subscriptions, advertising and sponsorship; and there is felt to be no necessity to preserve a distinction between the cable owner, the cable operator, and the programme providers - they could be the same company. Hunt recommended that, for the immediate future, there should be no quota on the import of foreign programmes. This has been modified in the *White Paper*; but, even so, there is to be no specific limit on the amount of imported material that can be shown.

There is to be no necessary or statutory obligation on cable systems to carry community programmes, education programmes or local access programmes. In the words of Hunt, however, "There is a presumption that these should be provided"⁽¹²⁾; this will be taken into account when allocating franchises. Applicants would be judged partly on what they are willing to provide in the way of community and education programmes - although there is no indication of the relative weight that this aspect of a franchise bid would carry.

Despite the guidelines provided in the *Hunt Report* and the *White Paper*, many issues are fudged or deferred - and not just those concerning the "peripheral" area of education and social action broadcasting. Perhaps the most serious fault is the lack of any detailed discussion about the financing of cable systems or of the production of programmes for them. Public funding for cable is not even considered as a viable option. Instead, it is assumed that an elastic advertising and sponsorship market exists that will generate sufficient funding to support cable systems. There is also little discussion about the pricing of the services that may be available on cable, or about local programme origination for cable. On this last point, it has been argued that local distribution of programming will not necessarily imply local production. John Howkins, for example, speaking at a recent seminar, suggested that much of the programming will be nationally produced and locally disseminated, rather than material originated locally.⁽¹³⁾

The likely implications for education and social action broadcasting are equally unclear. Specifically, it is not known whether local broadcasting is to be considered as a right or as a privilege. Similarly, neither Hunt nor the *White Paper* clearly indicates the degree of financial support that might be available for the production of education materials and for the development of the follow-up mechanism that would be necessary - even in small local systems - in order to maximise the educational benefit from programmes. In the short term, few systems will have any substantial two-way switching; so the extent to which these can be used for education and social action is equally unclear. Indeed, it is likely that some of the first systems to be licensed will be patched-up versions of existing networks: a wasteful method of developing a new cable system. Again in the short-term, it is probable that such profitable pay-television services as feature films and live sporting events will predominate, and will influence the degree to which operators are willing to commit themselves to social channels, education channels, or any other community uses of the systems. And all this has to be seen in the context of the strong probability that, for the foreseeable future, no more than 50% of the country will be equipped for cable (and mostly urban areas at that). All these problems will have to be considered even before one turns one's mind to those other thorny issues such as copyright, financial arrangements for educational providers, and so on - matters to which educational institutions must give urgent consideration.

On the other hand, it must also be pointed out that there may be co-operation at local level between local cable systems and local education television facilities; indeed, some negotiations are already in progress. At a national level, specific educational channels may also be established - similar to the 24-hour health channel in the United States that is free to the subscriber and supported by sponsorship and advertising. Even so, the short-term value to education and social action broadcasting of the expansion of cable television services is likely to be limited - although there is the possibility of some useful co-operation at local level between existing organisations and cable operators.

All this will (or may) happen in a country where there is a considerable, and rapidly-increasing, penetration of video - a factor that may also influence the development of cable systems. We already have an interactive system that can easily be linked with the video screen: Prestel, which utilises the telephone network. The fact that Prestel was initially almost stillborn certainly does not mean that it has no potential. Both video and Prestel are obvious candidates for use in education and social action: indeed, there is already a "Prestel for People" scheme operated by a consortium of statutory and voluntary groups.

The development of cable systems will also have important implications for existing broadcasting provision, particularly in the medium to long term. There are already signs that the patterns of viewing of broadcast television are changing under the influence of video, television games, home computers and so on. If, on top of this, cheap and attractive pay-television services were established, the trend away from viewing broadcast programmes might accelerate. The implications for commercial television would be considerable. If the *Hunt Report* is wrong in its assumptions about the elasticity of the advertising market, then independent television's income could well drop should there be any significant shift of advertising expenditure towards cable. As for the BBC, the fact that they might be attracting smaller audiences could make it less easy to justify maintaining the license fee. In these circumstances, there would be a considerable squeeze on the money available (directly to ITV, indirectly to BBC) for high-quality productions. Despite the recent reaffirmation (at the 1983 Educational Television Association conference) by

the Director General of the BBC of the corporation's commitment to education broadcasting, and despite the high reputation of such broadcasting, it would be quite likely to suffer in the ensuing scramble for resources; the same would probably happen in the ITV sector. This would throw into jeopardy much of what has been achieved over the past 60 years. And not only that; it would, in fact, doubly disadvantage those people who cannot receive, cannot afford, or do not want the new cable services - even supposing those services were to offer educational programmes.

This forecast may seem pessimistic; but pessimism is unavoidable if one reads carefully the proposals of the *Hunt Report* and the *White Paper*.

A FRAMEWORK FOR ACTION

So what can be done about cable? One could adopt the Luddite response, and oppose it militantly. Or one could adopt the ostrich response: stick one's head in the sand and hope that it will go away. But cable will not go away: the pressures to make use of the new technology are probably too strong. But in order for it to have any specific educational potential, cable must be taken out of the market place - out of a situation where educational opportunities are made available to those who can pay, and withheld from those who cannot. Were this market strategy to be implemented, it would represent a major reversal of the philosophy of education broadcasting in this country. To achieve an acceptable situation on cable there must be statutory provision and structures, first of all for air-time for education and social action broadcasting. Provision must also be made for supporting the production of this kind of programme, and for an infrastructure that will enable them to be followed up.

There are several steps in setting about trying to achieve these provisions. First, a realistic assessment must be made of the role cable can play in education and social action; an assessment that must probe rather deeper than the level of "Oh well, it has a role because Tom, Dick and Harry are doing it". Second, access to clear and concise information about cable's technical potential, about the implications of any likely statutory instruments and so on, is vital; certainly, this information must be presented in a clearer way than it is in the *Hunt Report*. Third, an equally clear understanding is needed about the minimum levels of provision required to give cable a useful role in education and social action broadcasting; this would involve discussion about everything from structures of ownership and control to such matters as the training in production techniques that would be required for educators at local levels. Fourth, there needs to be a coherent campaign to press for these requirements; at the same time, there is a need to avoid the squalid spectacle of agencies grovelling for the crumbs thrown to them by individual cable operators.

Now that the *White Paper* is published, three aspects of this campaign need to be considered. First, Government and MPs must be lobbied about the Paper's content; given the proposed timetable, there is some urgency about this. Second, potential operators must also be lobbied about the needs of education and social action broadcasting on cable. And third, the new franchising authority must be made aware of these requirements. Given the determination of the Government to implement the expansion of cable along the lines suggested by the *White Paper*, one can hardly be very optimistic about the success of such a strategy; but it is worth remembering that, on occasions, a concerted strategy can work, as shown by the influence that lobbying had on the eventual shape of Channel 4.

Finally, the *Hunt Report* insists that cable should be "innovative, experimental, and sensitive to local needs". Such innovations must be monitored so that criteria other than financial are used for assessing their success. This is particularly necessary in order to establish which initiatives have genuine educational or social value, and which are a waste of time.

THE BROADER CONTEXT

The *Hunt Report* isolates four key functions, or groups of people, involved in the expansion of cable television services: the cable provider, the cable operator, the programme provider and the programme makers. There is virtually no reference to the public or the audience, nor any assessment of the needs of that audience other than as consumers. This is a common bias in much of the literature about cable, where one reads about "consumers", "units", "households", "purchasers", "user-friendly systems" and other such terms with a 1984 ring about them, but seldom about "people", "persons", "families", "homes" or "needs". It is tempting to start thinking in that same mechanistic way oneself.

Even within education, there is a danger of neglecting the human implications of new technology; for example, one might wonder about the wisdom of encouraging an even greater reliance on video and cable technology in the quest for a well-rounded education. Perhaps there is actually a case for less television rather than more. It is also arguable that even the most sophisticated interactive devices encourage a particular kind of linear thinking; certainly, such interaction usually takes place within a very circumscribed range of options. The National Consumer Council has already criticised the working of the information access system within Prestel, suggesting that it was devised for the convenience of the programmer rather than the consumer. Perhaps the impact of new technologies on education should be evaluated in terms of its effect on how we learn to think, debate and appreciate - all important aspects of a well-rounded, liberal education, even in a technological age.

It has already been suggested above that the expansion of cable should be viewed in the context of developments in information technology as a whole. Equally, we should examine that technology in the context of its implications for education and society in general. Some trends are already apparent: perhaps rather slowly in this country, robots are being introduced into industry; computers are appearing in the workplace; and data bases are being developed that are so powerful as to cause a great deal of public concern about the security of confidential information - as, for example, in the debates during the last Parliament about the Police and Criminal Evidence Bill and the Data Protection Bill. Some maintain that the expansion of information technology, with its capacity to store vast quantities of readily-accessible data, will lead to a more open society; for example, techno-optimists such as Tom Stonier speak of society as becoming more "information-leaky". Such a situation, it is argued, will make it increasingly difficult for one group in society to manipulate other groups. On the other hand, it is equally possible that all this information might actually become concentrated in the hands of a new and powerful "information elite". In order to guard against this eventuality, and to reduce the dangers of marginality and relative deprivation, the skills required to use information systems must be made more widely accessible. This is obviously a major task for education to address. Equally important, there must be the political will to maintain a proper balance between the confidentiality and accessibility of information - not least in order to avoid the spectre of a growing gap between what might be called the "information rich" and the "information poor". This is particularly important in view of

the fact that information will increasingly come to equal power - not only within communities, but within countries and even internationally. Information is so important that control of it cannot be vested simply in Governments, in companies or in private individuals. The public at large must have a stake in that control.

The revolution in information technology will also have major implications for social life and for job structures and practices, so that when, for example, most work can be done from home, the distinction between the world of work and the world of leisure will become blurred. Ways must be sought of coping with these changes and of minimising their less welcome side-effects. There will also be implications for policy relating to public and social services. Naomi Sargant⁽¹⁴⁾ recently suggested that one obvious consequence of increasingly home-based work and leisure could be a reduced provision of public transport. But there may also be reductions in education and social services - a development that would have drastic implications for education and social action broadcasting. What educational resources will be necessary to help people cope with these changes? What will be their effect on educational institutions as we know them? Will there be a greater emphasis on individual home-based learning - vocational or otherwise? Will there be increased opportunities for self-education and self-continuing education? How best can these be catered for?

On another level, what will be the effect on social and interpersonal relationships? Will face-to-face contact be reduced or enhanced? What implications will there be for individual, social and national identity and culture? And in any case, whose conceptions of identity and culture will these be? Any running-down of nationally-provided social services may require the development of new forms of social relationships, self-organisation, self-preservation, voluntary work and mutual aid. These are all tasks in which education and social action broadcasting (on the cable or otherwise) are likely to be called on to play a part.

As Naomi Sargant has argued, developments in information technology should be encouraged to the extent to which they complement existing services and enhance the quality of social life. To the extent that they do not do so, they must be resisted - or moulded to more socially acceptable ends.

Confronted with these immense possibilities, it is tempting simply to shrug one's shoulders and murmur something about "technological determinism" or "technological inevitability". But, as Raymond Williams has argued, the notion of technological determinism is a fallacy. Technological innovation and its implementation always presuppose a prior intention - which for example, explains why wireless rather than wired communication was introduced in the 1920's. The real question concerns whose intentions will guide the implementation of new technologies. In whose interests are particular versions of that technology introduced? For what purpose, and with what vision of the future? These questions must be asked, since the purposes to which even one and the same technology can be put may differ radically. For this reason, there should be a properly-informed debate - taking into account the technical possibilities, the political options, the economic constraints and, most important, the human needs - about the proper balance between interests and benefits, and about how to ensure that they are shared equitably for the common good. Cable is a specific case that requires urgent action, and is therefore a good starting-point. There is no doubt that cable, and the new information technologies generally, contains the seeds of many dramatic new opportunities. The decisions of the new few months will determine whether those opportunities will become realities.

NOTES

- 1 *Report of the Inquiry into Cable Expansion and Broadcasting Policy* (The Hunt Report), October 1982, Cmnd 8679.
- 2 *The Development of Cable Systems and Services* (Cable White Paper), April 1983, Cmnd 8866.
- 3 Anthony Smith, "The Wire and the Wavelength - An Historical Struggle" in C Heller (ed), *Cable: An Examination of the Social and Political Implications of Cable TV* (London, Standing Conference on Broadcasting), 1973, pp 27-40.
- 4 Graham Murdock, "The Economic Context of Cable Television" in C Heller (ed), *op cit*, pp 77-94.
- 5 As an example of the social research that was conducted on Cable, see Paul Croll and Charles Husband, *Communication and Community* (Leicester, Centre for Mass Communication Research), 1975.
- 6 Brian Stanley, *Cable TV - An Integrated Network*, Post Office Engineering Union, January 1974, pp 18-20.
- 7 *Report on Cable Systems* (ITAP Report), HMSO, 1982.
- 8 John Robinson, *Learning Over the Air: 60 Years of Partnership in Adult Learning* (BBC Publications), 1982.
- 9 Raymond Williams, *Technology and Cultural Form* (Fontana), 1974.
- 10 Dipak Nandy, "Hunt: a charter for hustlers", *The Times*, 14 October 1982, p 12.
- 11 *Hunt Report, op cit*, p 2.
- 12 *Hunt Report, op cit*, p 22.
- 13 John Howkins, *The Potential of Cable and Satellite*. A paper presented to a Seminar on the Implications of Cable and Satellites for Social Action and Educational Broadcasting (London, ICA, 20 January 1983).
- 14 Naomi Sargent, *How Will Information Technology Serve the Community?* Paper presented to a conference on Information Technology 82 (London, The Barbican Centre, 8-9 December 1982).

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